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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

FOR PM ASSISTANT SECRETARY KIMMITT

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [OTRA](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR ASSISTANT SECRETARY MARK KIMMITT AND THE
U.S. DELEGATION TO U.S.-VIETNAM DEFENSE DIALOGUE

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Introduction

1. (SBU) Embassy Hanoi looks forward to welcoming you to Vietnam. Your visit for the first-ever U.S.-Vietnam defense dialogue will be an important milestone in the growing U.S.-Vietnam relationship and will highlight a broad area of bilateral defense and security cooperation that has now begun to gather momentum in the wake of Vietnamese Prime Minister Dung's June visit to Washington. The U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relationship continues to broaden and mature, in the process spurring economic, social and technological development that has eased the path for a limited expansion of personal freedom for the people of Vietnam. Vietnam's economic successes have translated into greater international clout, reflected in its current seat as a non-permanent member of the U.N. Security Council. GVN leaders understand that the United States plays a direct role in creating the conditions for their nation's success and are committed to advancing the bilateral relationship.

2. (SBU) Our strengthening relations are also due to Vietnam's realization that the United States is an important force in maintaining a stable geopolitical environment in which even "small" countries like Vietnam are assured their independence and freedom of action. As such, Vietnam's leaders speak positively and optimistically about the future of U.S.-Vietnam ties. Differences over human rights remain, however, and lingering fears that the United States supports the overthrow of the current regime continue to complicate the relationship. China also looms as a factor coloring Hanoi's reactions to our proposals in the security realm. The Ministry of Defense is one of the ministries most suspicious of the United States and of our deepening bilateral ties.

Defense and Security Talks

3. (SBU) The first-ever U.S.-Vietnam Defense and Security Talks (the GVN is still hesitating on the official name for the talks) will be a milestone in our defense relationship with the GVN. The GVN side will likely be led by Vice Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh. The GVN agreed to the U.S.-proposed agenda items, but we expect them to raise additional items the day of the talks. At the working level, Ministry of Foreign Affairs contacts have highlighted the complexity of getting interagency agreement on issues and positions between themselves, the Ministry of Defense, and the Ministry of Public Security. The talks offer an opportunity to emphasize the importance of interagency cooperation on a range of defense and security issues, as well as to make progress on the specific agenda items. Although not yet confirmed, we expect an opportunity for a joint press availability following the close of the talks.

Gradual Progress in Defense Cooperation

¶4. (SBU) Defense relations have advanced at a measured pace, but reflect the overall positive shift in the relationship. We conduct professional military exchanges with the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) in a limited but growing range of areas including military law, military nursing, public affairs, search and rescue, meteorological/ oceanographic (METOC) prediction, and disaster preparedness. PAVN officers have been invited as observers to Cobra Gold for the past four years and routinely attend U.S. Pacific Command-sponsored multilateral conferences. Since 1997, over sixty GVN officials, including more than thirty PAVN officers, have attended courses and seminars at the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS). PAVN also now sends observers to the annual Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercises.

¶5. (SBU) Since 2003, U.S. Navy ships have made five port visits to Vietnam, including most recently a November 14-18, 2007 visit by two mine countermeasures ships, the USS Guardian and the USS Patriot, at Haiphong port. In June, Vietnam participated in the Pacific Partnership mission of the USNS Mercy. In 2005, Vietnam agreed to participate in the International Military Education and Training Program (IMET). In 2007, we accelerated the pace of IMET and provided a language laboratory in Hanoi using IMET funds. In FY08, IMET expanded mil-mil contacts through a U.S. mobile training team visit for military medical techniques training. The GVN also continues to send well-qualified candidates to English language training and English language instructor training to the Defense Language Institute (DLI). Reaching our full potential for closer cooperation in defense activities, including multilateral peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance efforts and attendance at U.S. military schools, is attainable, but will require persistence and patience.

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¶6. (SBU) One operational issue affecting our ability to charge ahead with mil-mil programs is the GVN's refusal to grant a visa to our incoming Defense Attache, Colonel Patrick Reardon. In June, the GVN acknowledged Colonel Reardon's renunciation of his Vietnamese citizenship, but ongoing debate between and within the Ministries of Defense, Public Security and Foreign Affairs appear to have stymied issuance of his visa or accreditation despite multiple high level entreaties from the Embassy.

Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI)

¶7. (SBU) In recent years, the GVN has expressed increasing interest in involvement in peacekeeping missions, especially those organized under UN auspices. Vietnam's current seat on the UN Security Council has given significant impetus to such increased international engagement. Nonetheless, in order to fully engage in future peacekeeping operations the GVN will have to do much more to meet significant challenges: the lack of interoperability, the paucity of English language speakers in the military, and complications due to funding issues. Their participation in the Global Peacekeeping Operations Initiative (GPOI) is an important step in this direction.

¶8. (SBU) The Joint Statement from PM Dung's June visit to Washington highlights Vietnam's agreement to participate in GPOI, through training courses and other peacekeeping operations activities. The next step is crafting a 'country plan' for Vietnam. This will involve a "Program Design & Development Visit" to Hanoi by a team from PACOM and the Center on Civil-Military Relations at the Naval Post-Graduate School. In discussions with MOD and MFA officials and the Embassy, the team will craft a GPOI training plan tailored to Vietnam's current capabilities and priorities. PACOM elaborated on this at the mil-mil Bilateral Defense Dialogue (BDD) in September, but did not secure agreement from the GVN to accept the planning team. Highlighting a visit from the planning team as the next step in the GVN's participation in GPOI and securing GVN agreement to accept and work with the team would be an important outcome of the

defense talks.

Impacts of Remaining UXO

¶9. (SBU) In your meetings, you are likely to hear references to "consequences of war" or "legacies of war" issues. This is the catch-all term that the GVN applies to a myriad of problems, including Agent Orange(AO)/Dioxin contamination, unexploded ordnance (UXO) and land mines from the war era, and the incomplete recovery of missing Vietnamese military personnel.

¶10. (SBU) Since 1989, USAID, through support from the Patrick J. Leahy War Victims Fund (LWVF) and other sources, has provided over USD 43 million to support NGOs and private voluntary organizations to develop comprehensive programs for people with disabilities. In addition, since 1993 the USG has been actively involved in assisting the people of Vietnam in overcoming the social and economic impacts of remaining UXO from the war. Vietnam was formally accepted as the 37th participant in the U.S. Humanitarian De-mining Program in June 2000, and the USG is now the largest donor of humanitarian assistance for mine action programs in Vietnam. The USG has invested over USD 37 million in a broad spectrum of programs not only to locate, remove and destroy unexploded ordnance and landmines, but also to address the UXO effects on health and livelihood of Vietnamese living in affected areas.

¶11. (SBU) Today, various NGOs conduct UXO and land mine clearance, risk education and victim rehabilitation. The USG has also donated a significant quantity of equipment to the PAVN to assist efforts in UXO and landmine clearance and return land to productive use. In 2006, the State Department provided USD 3.5 million to support UXO action and demining activities in Vietnam, almost a third of which went directly to PAVN in the form of donated demining equipment. In FY08, an additional USD 2.5 million will be provided to underwrite mine action related activities in Vietnam. For FY08, Congress directed that approximately \$2.5 million be spent on demining programs, a substantial increase from the \$800,000 requested by the Administration.

¶12. (SBU) Your visit follows a very successful visit by Deputy Assistant Secretary Stephen Ganyard in September to Hanoi and several sites in central Vietnam. Looking ahead, we have encouraged Vietnam to work with us to develop a national strategy to address the complex and challenging problems associated with Explosive Remnants of War (ERW). A national-level strategic framework is essential both to maximize the impact of limited resources on the

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ground today, and to facilitate the growth of Vietnam's own planning and management capacity in the future. Encouraging Vietnam's commitment to a systematic, national approach will ultimately make Vietnam's own mine action efforts more effective, a valuable achievement that will make Vietnam more competitive in the competition for increasingly scarce humanitarian assistance from global donors.

Agent Orange/Dioxin

¶13. (SBU) While debate continues over the human impact of AO, recent studies reveal that dioxin contamination is concentrated in approximately 20 "hotspots," mostly former U.S. bases where AO was stored. Areas subjected to heavy aerial spraying do not currently have soil concentrations considered hazardous. Our engagement on this issue has accomplished much, in both transforming the tone of the dialogue and capacity building. Projects have included work at the Danang airport as well as a USD 3 million Congressional appropriation for "dioxin mitigation and health activities," which USAID has begun to implement. The USG is continuing to work together with the GVN, UNDP, Ford Foundation and other NGOs to discuss the next steps in the environmental remediation of three priority hotspots in Danang, Hoa Binh and Phu Cat airfields. We have made significant progress in addressing constructively what remains an emotional issue for many Vietnamese who believe dioxin is responsible for most of the birth defects in Vietnam; this was seen

most recently in the positive press coverage of the September meeting of the bilateral Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) on Agent Orange/Dioxin in Hanoi.

Fullest Possible Accounting

¶14. (SBU) Predating the re-establishment of diplomatic relations and normal defense contacts, U.S. military and DoD elements continue their efforts toward the fullest possible accounting of Americans missing from the Vietnam Conflict. Since 1988, the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC), a USMACV subordinate element, has evolved to include forward Detachments in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand/Cambodia. With its Vietnam Detachment (Det 2), it has completed 90 92 Joint Field Activities (JFA), which incorporated extensive research, interviews, analysis, and excavations in order to accomplish its mission. Ultimately, JPAC's efforts in Southeast Asia have resulted in accounting for 880 899 Americans previously listed as MIA; 1766 1757 remain missing throughout Southeast Asia.

¶15. (SBU) From its inception, Det 2 forged good relations with its GVN counterparts. In December 2006, the GVN gave approval for the use of U.S. naval vessels to operate within their territorial waters in order to enhance JPAC's underwater investigations towards the identification of potential recovery sites. Coordination to complete the regulatory procedures for the use of such a vessel is in progress, and JPAC hopes to implement this new search platform in the coming fiscal year. However, JPAC continues to seek GVN permission to conduct JFAs unrestricted search operations in the Central Highlands - a politically sensitive region of the country. While understanding the GVN's hesitancy regarding such access, reinforcing the message that JPAC's mission is not political and that such access is critical to putting this legacy issue behind us would be useful for the GVN to hear from you.

Counterterrorism

¶16. (SBU) Vietnam says the right things about the threat of global terrorism and has participated with us in modest cooperative activities. During President Bush's visit in 2006, the President and his Vietnamese counterpart pledged to increase cooperation to halt the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and related technology and materials in accordance with international and national laws and each country's capacities. The United States provides counterterrorism assistance to Vietnam by funding Vietnamese participation in counterterrorism-related training at the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) in Bangkok, and through military-to-military exchanges with an emphasis on counterterrorism themes. Vietnam has signed eight out of thirteen UN terrorism conventions. Approval of the remaining five is winding its way through the cumbersome GVN bureaucracy, the delay explained in part by GVN concern with its capacity to carry out obligations under the conventions. Two of the remaining conventions are reportedly in the final stages of GVN approval, while the status of the other three remains unclear.

Expanding U.S. Naval Ship Visits

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¶17. (SBU) While we have regularized our SOP for regular ship visits over recent years, the GVN has remained firm in limiting the frequency of port visits by U.S. Navy vessels to one a year. This restriction is frequently cited as being consistent with GVN laws that regulate visits by foreign warships; however, some other nations conduct more frequent port visits. While it may be unproductive to demand more frequent port calls, we still seek to persuade the GVN to permit more frequent access for limited, technical calls (i.e., for refueling and replenishment). This would support our overall goal of increasing routine access for U.S. naval vessels at Vietnam's ports, while not escalating the pace of military contacts beyond a level that is comfortable for the GVN.

¶18. (SBU) Similarly, we hope to reverse the PAVN leadership's

reluctance to participate in distinguished visitor fly-outs to U.S. Navy vessels transiting the South China Sea. To date, these have been rebuffed due to concerns over the "appearance of Vietnam's participation in joint exercises with the United States." This, clearly, is code for limiting advances in the relationship to a pace that does not discomfort the Chinese.

Humanitarian Assistance

¶19. (SBU) Since 1995, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) programs have provided aid in legal reform, governance, economic growth, HIV/AIDS, environmental protection and disaster prevention. For FY 2007, total U.S. assistance from all agencies was about USD 86.6 million, most of which has gone towards providing health-related assistance, notably in the area of HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention. Vietnam is one of fifteen countries in the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), with USD 65 million provided in 2007 to expand integrated HIV/AIDS prevention, care and treatment programs. This figure includes approximately USD 3.1 million dollars for the Department of Defense (DOD)-managed portion of PEPFAR HIV/AIDS programs with Vietnam's Ministry of Defense.

¶20. (SBU) Since 2000, DOD has supported a wide variety of Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster and Civic Aid (OHDCA) projects in Vietnam. Through USPACOM, the U.S. Government has sponsored the construction of eight medical clinics in Thua Thien-Hue Province, a primary school in Quang Binh Province, and two centers for disabled children in Quang Binh Province. Two additional humanitarian assistance construction projects were completed in the summer of 2007 and turned over to local authorities in Central Vietnam: a medical clinic in Quang Binh Province, and a 10-room primary school in Quang Tri Province. Additionally, USPACOM has facilitated multiple donations of excess medical property to various medical facilities throughout Vietnam.

A Word on the Economy

¶21. (SBU) After a decade of isolation and failed economic policies, Vietnam is determined to catch up with the Asian tigers. Vietnam's "doi moi" (renovation) program of economic reform, begun in 1986, has set the country on a successful market economy path, with an average growth rate of 7.5 percent over the past decade. The GVN focuses on exports and foreign direct investment in its drive to achieve middle-income status by 2010. The United States is currently Vietnam's largest export market and third largest overall trade partner. U.S. investors tell us the key challenges they face in Vietnam are underdeveloped infrastructure, a shortage of skilled workers and managers, and the considerable level of state participation in the economy. For its part, the GVN is grappling with issues of corruption, improving the legal environment, and implementing its WTO commitments. Vietnam's current turmoil is rooted in high inflation (27.9 percent year-on-year September), the large current account deficit, and inefficient allocation of resources, which is particularly obvious in the disproportionate amount of state resources devoted to powerful State Owned Enterprises (SOEs).

Human Rights Challenges

¶22. (SBU) Serious deficiencies related to human rights in Vietnam include lack of freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of the press. One of our key objectives is to end the use of catch-all "national security" provisions for the prosecution of peaceful dissent. We continue to call for the release of all prisoners of conscience, but where we see individuals expressing their political opinions, many of our government interlocutors see "lawbreakers" trying to destabilize the regime. The recent arrests

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and sackings of Vietnamese reporters and editors in the wake of a corruption scandal reveal the on-going battle within the GVN over the role of freedom of the press. The continued existence of groups

in the United States that advocate regime change complicates human rights engagement by providing ammunition to hard-liners who want to stoke the fading paranoia that we are indeed still "the enemy." Reassuring the GVN that the USG does not support separatist groups can assist in building a better human rights dialogue based on mutual trust.

The China Factor

¶23. (SBU) While Vietnam's engagement with the United States will continue to broaden, China necessarily constitutes Vietnam's most important strategic preoccupation. This is not to say that Vietnam is "choosing" China over the United States; Vietnam's leadership is sophisticated enough to realize that relations with China and the United States do not represent a zero sum game; it is possible to have good relations with both. Each relationship also creates challenges, however. While China constitutes a vital and necessary commercial partner and former ally, it is also perceived as a significant and frustrating constraint to Vietnam's freedom of action.

¶24. (SBU) Chinese bullying of foreign companies in an attempt to compel them to cease oil and gas exploration efforts in the South China Sea serves to remind Vietnamese officials that while the Vietnamese may not approve of all U.S. policies, the same is certainly true of Chinese actions. While progress has been made in settling the land border, there is no commonality of views on sovereignty issues regarding the South China Sea, known as the "East Sea" to the Vietnamese. Hanoi is also "riding the tiger" with regard to managing the deep negative views toward China of many Vietnamese. China is widely disliked and distrusted as a former colonial master, and Beijing's actions in the Spratlys and Paracels threaten to inflame those passions. Should Hanoi allow unconstrained protests against the Chinese, however, it would appear weak in the face of calls to action that it could not satisfy, as well as risking Beijing's anger.

Future Prospects

¶25. (SBU) The GVN recognizes the strategic importance of the United States in the region and the world, but is not shy about criticizing U.S. actions it perceives as outside the multilateral system. The GVN routinely chafes over U.S. criticism of Vietnam's record of human rights and religious freedom. Nonetheless, Vietnam's leaders are also pragmatic and recognize that Vietnam's own continued economic well-being, growth and security are, in large measure, inexorably tied to its relationship with the United States.

¶26. (SBU) Vietnam has begun to explore opportunities within regional organizations to increase joint efforts against terrorism, narcotics, maritime piracy and other issues of shared concern. Vietnam has also recently begun joint sea patrols with other neighbors in the Gulf of Thailand and has established hotlines to help facilitate coordination along sea boundaries. Nevertheless, for historic and foreign policy reasons, the GVN is generally reluctant to speak out against its "traditional friends" such as North Korea and Iran when they engage in behavior that the rest of the international community condemns.

What You Can Expect

¶27. (SBU) You can expect your interlocutors not only to be articulate and well informed, but also to speak in terms generally supportive of growth in the bilateral relationship. As noted above, lingering suspicions still exist among conservatives in leadership about the development of closer ties with the United States, but the overall tenor is one of support and interest at a measured pace that will not upset the GVN's calibrated attempts to maintain balance among its other regional partners. The defense talks will continue to help translate those good feelings into measurable accomplishments in the defense and security relationship.

¶28. (SBU) We look forward to your visit and stand ready to do everything we can to make your time in Vietnam as productive as possible.

